Redefining the Sacred

Religion in the French and Russian Revolutions

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In Search of a New Pantheon: Hero and Leader Cults in Early Soviet Russia

Frithjof Benjamin Schenk

Analyzing hero and leader cults in early Soviet Russia one has to deal with two paradoxical findings. Firstly, one is struck by the pure existence of institutionalized veneration of "great men" in a country whose founders had declared historical materialism to be one pillar of their ideology and whose political philosophers tried to make us believe that the historical process is not shaped by individuals but by productive forces and class conflicts. Secondly, one is surprised after having taken a closer look at the most important and best-known example of leader cults in early Soviet Russia: the cult of Lenin. How comes – one cannot avoid to ask – that the practices, language and the symbolism which shaped this cult resemble so much the practices, language and symbolism of Orthodox christianity which the new regime had declared to overcome and to destroy?

This article tries to take a closer look at the emergence and the characteristics of hero and leader cults in early Soviet Russia. The period covered lasts from February, 1917 until the end of the 1920s when the Lenin cult was already waning and set apart by the emerging cult of Stalin. Although hero- and leader-cults in Soviet Russia stand in the centre of analysis, the events following the February Revolution must also be put into the picture. Despite the fact that the Bolsheviks broke with the political institutions of the provisional government, they inherited much of the symbolic repertoire, which had already been developed before they came to power. Thus decisive questions concerning the transformation of Russia's pantheon were discussed and answered already before the proceedings of "Red October."

In the first part of this article some aspects of the symbolic system of the *Ancien Régime* that was overthrown and destroyed during the revolutions of 1917 have to be briefly described. Of particular interest in this context are the various forms of veneration of "great men" (members of the ruling elite, Orthodox saints and Russian national heroes) during the reign of the Romanovs which were on the one hand challenged by the iconoclastic currents of the revolutions and which formed on the other hand one part of the cultural legacy the builders of the new order had to deal with. In a second step the analysis will focus on the development of hero and leader cults after February, 1917. In particular the cult of the victims of the February revolution, Lenin's project of "monumental propaganda" in 1918 and the development of the Lenin cult will be analyzed as examples of the heroic veneration of outstanding individuals after the fall of the old order. A third and final part is devoted to the discussion of the complicated

and to a certain extend contradictory relationship between the two cultural systems of Bolshevism and Orthodox Christianity. Comparing the various manifestations of the Lenin cult with the veneration of saints in the Orthodox Church one is struck at first glance by a number of obvious parallels and similarities. Nevertheless the structural differences between the adoration of the Bolshevik leader and the worship of Orthodox saints seem to be of even higher importance. The new regime inherited a number of religious elements from pre-revolutionary Russian culture but embedded them in a completely revised context of meanings and practices.

Iconoclasm: The Destruction of the Old Pantheon

It is a well known and undisputed fact that the Russian revolutions of February and October, 1917 were not only targeted at the political institutions of the old regime but tried at the same time to overthrow its detested system of signs, symbols and rituals. The official ideological trinity introduced in Russia during the reign of Nikolas I. of "autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality" ("samoderzhavie, pravoslavie, narodnost'") fell victim to the builders of the new order.[1] Whilst the engineers of the February uprising tried to replace the old fashioned triad with the French model of "liberté, égalité et fraternité" the Bolsheviks propagated their trinity compounded of "dictatorship of the proletariat, atheism, and internationalism." In both cases the foundations of the symbolic order of the autocratic regime were challenged and finally destroyed.

The rejection of the old symbolic order of "autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality" during the revolutions of 1917 affected in particular the three corresponding systems of cults of outstanding individuals: The cult of the Tsar, his family and his predecessors, the cult of Russian orthodox saints and the veneration of Russian national heroes.

1 On the concept of „official nationality" in pre-revolutionary Russia see Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Nicholas I. and Official Nationality in Russia 1825-1855, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1959; Nataniel Knight, Ethnicity, Nationality and the Masses: Narodnost' and Modernity in Imperial Russia, in: Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices, ed. by David L. Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis, New York 2000, pp. 41-65; Maureen Perrie, Narodnost': Notions of National Identity, in: Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution 1881-1940, ed. by Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, Oxford 1998, pp. 28-36; Andrej Zorin, Ideologija „pravoslavija – samoderžavija – narodnosti": opyt rekonstrukcii, in: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie 26 (1997), pp. 71-104; A. Zorin, Kormia dvuglavnogo orla. Literatura i gosudartvennaia ideologiia v Rossii v poslednej treti XVIII – pervoi treti XIX veka, Moskva 2001.

Autocracy (*samoderzhavie*)

Besides the abstract symbols of the imperial state (like the double headed eagle, the national flag, or the national anthem) the portraits of the emperor and his family and the various monuments depicting the emperor and his predecessors represented in the Russian symbolic space the first principle of the ideological triad: autocracy.[2] So it is not at all surprising that most of the iconoclasm of the February revolution was targeted against these symbols of the abhorred regime: the double headed eagle was chipped of public buildings and institutions, the portraits of the Tsar and his family were removed from public schools. The monument to Alexander III. on Znamenskaia square in Petrograd, fondly called "hippopotamus" by the citizens of Petrograd, was conquered on February 24 and decorated with red flags and banners displaying revolutionary watchwords. In March, 1917 the city Duma of Petrograd decided to rename squares and streets which reminded of the Tsars Alexander or Nicholas.[3]

Surprisingly a large number of statues, institutions or buildings, which symbolized no less than others the principle of autocracy – like for example the monuments to Nicholas I. or to Peter the Great in Petrograd – were not harmed neither by the iconoclastic strikes of February nor by those of October, 1917.[4] In April, 1918 the Bolshevik government issued a decree on the dismantling of monuments raised to honor monarchs and their servitors. The order was not only slowly executed but from the beginning exempted those monuments in public space which possessed a certain historical or artistic value. Lenin personally ordered to take down the statue of Alexander III. in Moscow, who had been particularly repugnant to revolutionaries. This example of Bolshevik iconoclasm became soon afterwards an integral part of Soviet cultural memory thanks to Sergei Eisenstein who integrated parts of documentaries showing the scene in his famous film "October – Ten days that Shook the World." Whereas the giant statue of Alexander III. in Moscow was torn down by revolutionaries, the monument to the Tsar in Petrograd on Znamenskaia square remained untouched. The detested equestrian statue was removed from public space not earlier than 1937 and preserved in a yard of the Russian Museum in Leningrad. The authorities were very modest in their campaign to "de-romanovize" the Russian cities. Surprisingly towns which were marked by their denominations as *lieu de*

2 On the symbolic dimension of Russian autocracy see: Michael Cherniavsky, Tsar and People. Studies in Russian Myths, New Haven 1961; Richard S. Wortman, Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy, vol. 1: From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I., Princeton 1995; vol. 2: From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II, Princeton 2000.

3 Interpreting the Russian Revolution. The Language and Symbols of 1917, ed. by Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, New Haven 1999, pp. 48-57.

4 Richard Stites, Iconoclastic Currents in the Russian Revolution: Destroying and Preserving the Past, in: Bolshevik Culture, ed. by A. Gleason, P. Kenez and R. Stites, Bloomington 1985, pp. 1-24, cf. pp. 6-10.

mémoire of the tsarist regime, like Caricyn (later: Stalingrad), Elizavetgrad (later: Zinov'evsk) or Ekaterinburg (later: Sverdlovsk) were given new, Bolshevik names not earlier than 1924 or 1925 respectively. All these examples show that the symbols of the autocratic order apparently had not completely lost their symbolic value among the masses after 1917 and not even when the Bolsheviks had consolidated their power after the end of the Civil War in 1921.

Orthodoxy (*pravoslavie*)

The second complex of worship of outstanding individuals, which was – in the eyes of the builders of the new regime – deeply connected with the darkness of the past, was the veneration of saints in the Orthodox Church.[5] Whilst these religious practises remained mostly untouched during and after the February revolution, the Bolsheviks spent a lot of energy to fight against the adulation of Orthodox miracle workers, holy princes and fools in Christ. The first assault against the worship of saints was the abolition of the old calendar with its holydays and Christian feasts, and its replacement with a new "Red calendar."[6] The second strike was targeted against the tradition of Christian baptism which was planned to be replaced by a new socialist ritual called "Oktiabrina." True Bolsheviks were supposed to give names like "Revoliutsia," "Fevralina" or "Vladlen" (derived from "Vladimir Lenin") to their newborn children and refrain from baptising them in the name of that saint whose holiday was celebrated on the child's birthday.[7] The third aspect of orthodox veneration of outstanding individuals which was criticized harshly by the Bolsheviks was the

5 On the attitude of the Bolsheviks towards the Orthodox Church cf. Richard Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime 1917-1924, London 1997, pp. 337 and foll.; Hans-Heinrich Nolte, Die Glaubensgemeinschaften und die Religionspolitik des Staates, in: Handbuch der Geschichte Rußlands, vol. 3/II, Von den autokratischen Reformen zum Sowjetstaat, ed. by. G. Schramm, Stuttgart 1992, pp. 1709-1741; Richard Stites, Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution, New York 1989, pp. 105 and foll.; Stefan Plaggenborg, Revolutionskultur. Menschenbilder und kulturelle Praxis in Sowjetrußland zwischen Oktoberrevolution und Stalinismus, Köln/Weimar/Wien 1996, pp. 289 and foll.; Michael V. Shkarovskiy, Die russische Kirche unter Stalin in den 20er und 30er Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts, in: Stalinismus vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Neue Wege der Forschung, ed. by Manfred Hildermeier, München 1998, pp. 233-254.

6 Malte Rolf, Constructing a Soviet Time: Bolshevik Festivals and their Rivals during the First Five-Year Plan. A Study of the Central Black Earth Region, in: Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 1,3 (2000), pp. 447-474; M. Rolf, Feste des „roten Kalenders": der große Umbruch und die sowjetische Ordnung der Zeit, in: Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 49 (2001), pp. 101-118; E. Ė. Keller, Prazdničnaja kul'tura Peterburga. Očerki istorii, St. Petersburg 2001, pp. 126-148.

7 René Fülöp-Miller, Geist und Gesicht des Bolschewismus. Darstellung und Kritik des kulturellen Lebens in Sowjet-Rußland, Zürich/Leipzig/Wien 1926, pp. 258-62; Stites, Iconoclastic Currents, p. 9.

veneration of holy relics. The belief in miraculous corpses was exposed to ridicule at many places and confronted with scientific explanations about the reasons why a human body does not decay under certain circumstances.[8]

Nationality (*narodnost'*)

The deconstruction of cults of remarkable historical individuals which were linked with the ideology of Russian nationalism was the easiest task of the revolutionaries to fulfill. There were hardly any monuments for national heroes in Russian public space which could have been torn down. Those which existed, like for example the monument of Minin and Pozharskii on Red square in Moscow remained untouched in most of the cases. At the same time, it was an easy exercise to ban all national heroes and individuals from history textbooks and to reconstruct the historical narrative according to the scientific laws of historical materialism. According to the new paradigm of Bolshevik historiography and its "doyen" Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovskii, not individuals had shaped the historical process but classes and productive forces.[9] Lenin personally sanctioned the new "general line" of Bolshevik historiography. So not the construction of a new pantheon but the deconstruction of the old one seemed to be the main concern of the Bolsheviks immediately after they came to power. But this is of course not the whole story. In fact right after the February revolution the emergence of new hero- and leader-cults which resembled often the traditional forms of the veneration of the Tsars, orthodox saints, and Russian national idols could be observed. Both the veneration and mystification of the political leader and the identification of outstanding individuals and their invocation as "martyrs" and "heroes" remained important patterns of the political culture und communication in Russia after February, 1917.

The veneration of heroes and political leaders after February, 1917

The appearance of leader cults after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. had at least two reasons.[10] First, in a political atmosphere where law had lost its status

8 Fülöp-Miller, Geist und Gesicht des Bolschewismus, pp. 249-252.

9 On Pokrovskii see Paul H. Aron, M. N. Pokrovskii and the Impact of the First Five-Year Plan on Soviet Historiography, in: Essays in Russian and Soviet History, ed. by J. S. Curtiss, Leiden 1963, pp. 283-302; George M. Enteen, Michail Nikolaevich Pokrovskii, in: The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History, vol. 28, Gulf Breeze/Fl. 1982, pp. 167-171; A. A. Chernobaev, Michail Nikolaevich Pokrovskii (1868-1932), in: Istoriki Rossii XVIII-XX vekov, ed. by A. A. Chernobaev, vyp. 2-i, Moskva 1995, pp. 51-61; A. N. Artizov and M. N. Pokrovskii, Final kar'ery – uspekh ili porazhenie? in: Otechestvennaia istoriia, 1998, 1, pp. 77-96.

10 On the notion of "leader cult" in the context of modern Russian and Soviet history see E. A. Rees, Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions, in: The Leader Cult in

as a source for the legitimization of political power the "personal authority of the revolutionary leader – his public image – acquired real importance." Second, "most of the common people still conceived of politics in monarchical terms."[11] Among the revolutionary masses one could observe a "quasi religious faith in the moral qualities and divine power of the people's chosen leader and national saviour."[12] But not only the frontmen of the revolutionary movement became objects of mystification and public devotion. Apparently there was also a widespread need among the revolutionary elites and masses to commemorate and honour those who had given their lives for the sake of the revolution.

The Cult of the Martyrs of the February Revolution

The glorious veneration of the victims of the February revolution in Petrograd can be considered as a first example of revolutionary hero cult in post-Romanov Russia.[13] The funeral of 184 martyrs of the street fighting on March 23 on the

Communist Dictatorships. Stalin and the Eastern Bloc, ed. by Balázs Apor, Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones and E. A. Rees, Houndmills 2004, pp. 3-26; Heidi Hein-Kircher, Führerkult und Führermythos. Theoretische Reflexionen zur Einführung, in: Der Führer im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts, ed. by Benno Ennker et al., Marburg 2010, pp. 3-26; Daniel Ursprung, Inszeniertes Charisma. Personenkult im Sozialismus, in: Charisma und Herrschaft. Führung und Verführung in der Politik, ed. by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara et al, Frankfurt 2011, pp. 151-176.

11 Figes, Kolonitskii, Interpreting the Russian Revolution, p. 89.

12 Ibid, p. 103. – The question of the historical roots of Soviet leader cults is highly contested among scholars. Jan Plamper and other experts on the Stalin cult and its emergence in the late 1920s argue for example that one should not overemphasise the pre-revolutionary tradition of veneration of „great men" in the Orthodox Church. See Jan Plamper, Introduction: Modern Personality Cults, in: Personality Cults in Stalinism – Personenkulte im Stalinismus, ed. by Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper, Göttingen 2004, pp. 13-42. Plamper declares Soviet "personality cults" to be phenomena of the "modern era" which are embedded more in a "Western tradition of modern [i.e. secular] personality cults" than in a tradition of "eternal Russian mysticism-cum-authoritarianism, embodied in the twin institutions of tsardom and the Russian Orthodox Church." (21) Plamper admits the importance of the legacies of pre-revolutionary monarchical cults, the veneration of leaders in intelligentsia circles in nineteenth century Russia and the tradition of paternalism in Russia for the development of Soviet leader cults. At the same time he downplays the impact of Christian tradition and the explanation of Soviet leader cults to be an "*ersatz* tool to generate political support among the popular masses" (21). The argument of "continuities of the Stalin cult to Russian Orthodoxy (...) glosses over all the new and different sources that combine to make up the Stalin cult." (39).

13 According to Figes and Kolonitskii after the February Revolution a significant leader cult emerged around Prime Minister Kerensky. They even call this cult „the most important factor in Russian political life." Figes, Kolonitskii, Interpreting the Russian Revolution, p. 87. – An example of revolutionary hero cult in Tsarist Russia was the veneration of the Bolshevik fighter Nikolai Bauman who was killed in 1905 by right wing activists of the "black hundreds" and whose funeral in Moscow on October 20 (old style) attracted

Field of Mars attracted more than 800,000 people from all parts of the capital.[14] The day of the funeral was declared a national holiday, all shops were closed, the canons of the Peter-and-Paul-fortress saluted 184 times during the ceremony. This gathering was not only impressive in terms of mass attendance. It was also the first secular outdoor ceremony ever in Russian history. The funeral was a true manifestation of the democratic values of the new order. No priests attended the meeting and no religious hymns were sung. Ten days before the arrival of Lenin in Petrograd there was no charismatic leader yet who used the ceremony for own propaganda purposes. The crowd proclaimed revolutionary songs and promised the victims "who fell during the fight against Tsarism" on their banners "eternal glory" ("Vechnaia slava pavshim v bor'be protiv tsarizma").[15] As a reference to the French Revolution an "altar of the cult of the revolution" was erected on the Field of Mars in Petrograd. The ground itself was renamed "Square of the victims of the revolution" and became one of the most important sites on the new symbolic map of Petrograd.[16] It was here where 1917 the first legal Russian demonstration on the first of May took place. And it was already on that very day where one could observe the attempt of the Bolsheviks to appropriate the political symbols of the February revolution. Lenin did not miss the chance to address a speech to the people who gathered on the Field of Mars on first of May, 1917, elaborating on the importance of this holiday and on the tasks of the Russian revolution. From now on the mass grave of the victims of the revolution became the final destination of Bolshevik manifestations in the capital on the first of May, starting at the Smolny Institute, passing the Winter Palace and ending up on the Field of Mars.[17]

The final step marking the complete adoption of the symbolic space of the Field of Mars by the Bolsheviks was the funeral of Moisei S. Uritskii in September, 1918 who had been killed by Social Revolutionaries in August that year. This first big Bolshevik funeral marked the transformation of the Field of Mars into one of the central sites of Bolshevik hero cult in Soviet Russia.[18] So it is not surprising that the monument erected for the martyrs of the Revolution was unveiled on the second anniversary of the October Revolution on November 7,

around 100.000 sympathizers. See Maurice Baring, A Year in Russia, New York 1917 (Reprint 1981), pp. 30-31; Orlando Figes, Die Tragödie eines Volkes. Die Epoche der russischen Revolution 1891 bis 1924, München 2001, p. 214.

14 Richard Stites, The Origins of Soviet Ritual Style: Symbol and Festival in the Russian Revolution, in: Symbols of Power. The Esthetics of Political Legitimation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, ed. by Claes Arvidsson and Lars Erik Blomqvist, Stockholm 1987, pp. 23-42, in particular pp. 26-27.

15 V. S. Shvarts, Arkhitekturnyi ansambl' Marsova Polia, Leningrad 1989, p. 161.

16 Figes, Kolonitskii, Interpreting the Russian Revolution, p. 30.

17 Stites, The Origins of Soviet Ritual Style, p. 31.

18 Richard Stites, Bolshevik Ritual Building in the 1920s, in: Russia in the Era of NEP. Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture, ed. by Sheila Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinovich and Richard Stites, Indiana 1996, pp. 295-309, 303-4.

1919 and not on March 23. Eight epitaphs, written by the first peoples' commissar of Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii, were added to the monument that was designed by the later famous architect Lev Vladimirovich Rudnev.[19] In these short texts the martyrs of the revolution are praised not as victims but as "heroes" who died a "beautiful death" (*umirali prekrasno*).[20] Their martyrdom is presented in the tradition of the sacrifice of the fighters of the French Revolution, the European rebellions of 1848 and the Paris Commune. They are promised (once more) an "eternal life (v narode zhiv vechno)" in the memory of the people since they gave their life for the "common cause" ("V narode zhiv vechno kto dlia naroda zhizn' polozhil, trudilsia, borolsia i umer za obshchee delo").[21] The promise of eternal life in the collective memory of the people is a well known pattern of national memorials from the nineteenth century and therefore no specificity of Bolshevik symbolic practices.[22] Nevertheless, it is remarkable that these national and secular promises of an eternal life after death were adopted by Bolsheviks and fitted in their discourses about revolutionary heroes and martyrs.

Lenin's Programme of Monumental Propaganda

Whilst the monument for the victims of the revolution on the Field of Mars in Petrograd can be interpreted as a result of institutionalization of the memory of a certain social group Lenin's programme of "Monumental propaganda" definitely was an attempt to expose an invented historical narrative of the Bolshevik revolution and to establish a new revolutionary pantheon in Soviet Russia.[23] On April 12, 1918, when Lenin issued the decree, commanding the

19 Shvarts, Arkhitekturnyi ansambl' Marsova Polia, pp. 164-176.

20 Ibid, p. 174.

21 Ibid, p. 174.

22 See for example Der politische Totenkult. Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne, ed. by Reinhard Kosellek and Michael Jeismann, München 1994; Manfred Hettling, Totenkult statt Revolution. 1848 und seine Opfer, Frankfurt am Main 1998; Olaf B. Rader, Grab und Herrschaft. Politischer Totenkult von Alexander dem Großen bis Lenin, München 2003.

23 Stites, The Origins of Soviet Ritual Style, pp. 33-35; John Bowlt, Russian Sculpture and Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda, in: Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics, ed. by H. A. Milton and L. Nochlin, Cambridge 1978, pp. 182-193; Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, p. 314; Mikhail German, Serdtsem slushaia revoliutsiiu. Iskusstvo pervykh let oktiabria, Leningrad 1977, pp. 8-12; Plaggenborg, Revolutionskultur, pp. 247 and foll.; Robert Russell, The Arts and the Russian Civil War, in: Journal for European Studies 20 (1990), pp. 219-240, cf. pp. 223-225; Monica Rüthers, Moskau bauen. Von Lenin bis Chruščev, Wien 2007, pp. 78-79; Bettina Jugen, Rußlands Hang zum Monumentalen: Sowjetische Propaganda in den Jahren nach der Oktoberrevolution, in: Kultur, Macht, Gesellschaft. Beiträge des Promotionskollegs Ost-West, ed. by Anne Hartmann et al., Münster 2003, pp. 197-212.

removal of tsarist monuments from Russian cities, he ordered – on the other hand – the erection of new busts and monuments for the heroes and revolutionaries of the European and Russian history. The whole idea of "monumental propaganda" was inspired by a book, written in the seventeenth-century by the Dominican Tomaso di Campanella. His utopian "City of the Sun" is decorated with busts of national heroes and its walls covered with edifying frescoes.

Lenin was fascinated by this idea and asked commissar Lunacharskii to compile a list of suitable persons for a respective Bolshevik pantheon. The communist leader wanted to use the new monuments as tools of propaganda to communicate with the urban masses and as a means of historical legitimization of the Russian revolution. Despite the fact that Lunacharskii remained very reserved regarding the whole idea, a list of potential members of the new pantheon was compiled and approved in July, 1918. It included 63 persons taken from ancient history (for example Spartacus), from the history of the French Revolution (like Marat, Robespierre and Danton), from the history of socialism in Europe (for example Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg) and last but not least from Russian revolutionary history (like Pestel' and Radishchev). According to Lunacharskii, Lenin's intention was that those persons honoured by monuments should be "the precursors of socialism or theoreticians and fighters for socialism, and also those luminaries of philosophy, science, art etc. who, while having no direct connection with socialism, were nevertheless real heroes of culture."[24]

On October 6, 1918 the first bust of Radishchev was erected in Moscow, in early November statues for Robespierre, Shevchenko, Nikitin and others followed. On the first anniversary of the October Revolution – November 7, 1918 – Lenin personally unveiled a monument for Marx and Engels on the square of the Revolution in Moscow. On the first of May, 1919 Lenin took part in the ceremony when a statue for the seventeenth-century rebel Stepan Razin was presented to the public. So it was Lenin himself who showed the party and the people how to revere their historical heroes and leaders.[25]

The project of monumental propaganda was an initiative promoted by the very top of the political hierarchy. The population met it with great reservations. Progressive artists of the avant-garde disliked the traditional shape of some of the busts. Meanwhile more conservative contemporaries detested some monuments for their futuristic profile. The whole idea, inspired by a book from the seventeenth century and probably stimulated by national pantheons in France or Germany was obviously too abstract and foreign to the Russian population for whom most of the depicted persons were just foreigners. So some

24 A. V. Lunacharskii, Lenin o monumental'noi propagande, in: Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia, Moscow 1968, p. 198. Engl. trans. cit. accord.: Robert Russell, The Arts and the Russian Civil War, in: Journal for European Studies 20 (1990), p. 224.

25 Stites, The Origins of Soviet Ritual Style, p. 37.

of the newly erected monuments even fell victim to acts of spontaneous iconoclasm like the bust of Robespierre in Moscow, which was blown up in the night of November 6, 1918. The rest of the statues soon crumbled since they were made out of concrete or gypsum. The whole project of monumental propaganda disappeared as quickly as the idea had been put forward by Lenin.

The Development of the Lenin Cult

While the establishment of a new Bolshevik pantheon of dead and unknown heroes was a complete debacle, the cult of Lenin promised to be a more appropriate form of heroism in early Soviet Russia.[26] The Lenin cult found its roots in the political culture of the Bolshevik regime and emerged despite the fact that Lenin rhetorically detested all kinds of cults of living political leaders.[27]

Lenin's project of monumental propaganda and the Bolshevik appropriation of the cult of the martyrs of the February Revolution show that he accepted the worship of prominent historical persons as a tool of political propaganda and legitimization.[28] On the other hand he harshly criticized the efforts of his followers and contemporaries to turn him into a "harmless icon" as he put it.[29] When the Moscow party committee celebrated his 50th birthday on April 22, 1920 and several high officials like Kamenev, Stalin and Lunacharskii delivered flattering speeches to his honor, Lenin showed up only at the very end of the ceremony, thanked the assembly for their greetings and for having spared him from listening to them. But in the meantime Lenin allowed the praise of his person to go on.[30]

Lenin's attitude of modesty was in fact just one part of the heroic self-image he was constantly constructing around his own person. Lenin himself contributed

26 Nina Tumarkin, Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia, Cambridge/Mass. 1983; Benno Ennker, Die Anfänge des Leninkults in der Sowjetunion, Köln 1997; Olga Velikanova, Making of an Idol: On Uses of Lenin, Göttingen 1996 (=Kritik der Geschichtsschreibung, 8); Olga Velinkanova, The Public Perception of the Cult of Lenin Based on Archival Materials (=Slavic studies, 6), Lampeter 2001.

27 The Bolsheviks rejected the term „cult" (*kul't*) as an element of their own political vocabulary. The term was mainly in use as an ideological weapon to fight religious practices. Still in 1935 a dictionary printed in the USSR defined „kul't" as „religious worship of a god" and lists the „Russian Orthodox cult" as an example. D. N. Ushakov, Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka, vol. 1, Moscow 1935, p. 1546. Cit. cf. Plamper, Introduction, p. 29, n. 27.

28 Like George Plekhanov with his book „The Role of the Individual in History" (New York 1940), Lenin rejected the dogma of historical materialism that individuals and personalities matter in the course of history much less than collectives. See Plamper, Introduction, p. 28.

29 Tumarkin, Lenin Lives!, p. 90.

30 Ibid, p. 95-104.

substantially to the cult of his own. The Bolshevik leader wished to be perceived as an example for his compatriots. He wanted them to study as concentrated as he did and expected them to work as hard as he showed them to do. But even more important for the emergence of the Lenin cult is the unprecedented accumulation of power in the leader's hands after the events of October, 1917. The authority of Lenin within the party and the new state institutions was undisputed. He became the first party leader in history who attained already in lifetime a quasi God-like status. Lenin was perceived not only as the leader of the revolution but also as its incarnation and embodiment. The identification of Lenin, the revolution and the new state was so strong that one of the three could not be imagined without the other two.[31]

The veneration of Lenin resembled already during his lifetime religious forms and practices. After having survived an attempt on his life in August, 1918 Trotsky and Zinovev praised Lenin to be the "the leader of a new epoch" and the "apostle of world communism." His book "What is to be done?" was called the "gospel of the Iskraists." Zinovev concluded his panegyric article with the words: "He is really the chosen one of millions. He is the leader by the grace of God."[32] In their articles Trotsky and Zinovev adopted and used the vocabulary and elements of traditional religious discourses to describe Lenin and his deeds. The allusions to Jesus Christ and the apostles were strong metaphors which most of the readers were supposed to understand. With their articles Trotsky and Zinovev set the frame for the further development of the Lenin cult.

After August, 1918 the first biographies of Lenin for a broad audience were written and distributed, the first busts depicting the leader of the revolution were erected in Russia's cities and in 1919 the first village was renamed after Vladimir Il'ich Ulianov. On various posters Lenin was depicted as the true leader of the revolution whose hand points in the direction the country was to set course for.

As the images of Lenin, the revolution and the new state hade merged into one already during Lenin's lifetime, a severe crisis of legitimacy seemed to be inevitable when the leader disappeared from the political scene due to serious health problems in 1923. Since Lenin was accepted as the one and only political leader in Soviet Russia, there was no other person who was able to step in the gap after Lenin had to leave his post. Being confronted with this dilemma Lenin's heirs in the party decided to immortalize him as a political symbol and to maintain his constant political presence through the institutions of a cult. Already in January, 1923 the term "Leninism" was invented to transform the writings and the political philosophy of the sick leader into a canonical fundament of the Bolshevik ideology. In April, 1923 the Moscow party

31 Manfred Hildermeier, Geschichte der Sowjetunion 1917-1991. Entstehung und Niedergang des ersten sozialistischen Staates, München 1998, p. 324.

32 Tumarkin, Lenin Lives!, p. 82; Ennker, Anfänge, p. 37.

organization decided to found the "Lenin-Institute" which was supposed to collect all of Lenin's writings, to prepare editions of his selected works and to produce canonical biographies of Lenin for the masses. While V. I. Ulianov was suffering from his deteriorating health condition, the political symbol "Lenin" was depicted as residing for ever in his teaching and his writing.[33]

When Lenin finally died in January, 1924 the cult of his person had already been established and taken shape. The party had decided to preserve the leader as a political symbol which ought to help them to fill the vacuum of legitimacy which had emerged after Lenin left the political scene. After Lenin's death the party made a strong effort not to lose control over the image of the dead leader. In a communiqué issued on January 24 and transmitted to all regional and local party organizations, the Central Committee described the pattern for the national mourning and fixed the new canonical image of the dead leader.[34] In fact, most of the articles published in regional newspapers on the occasion of Lenin's death followed the "general line" of the Central Committee.

In the article issued by the top of the party hierarchy, Lenin was praised as the founder of the Bolshevik party and the incarnation of the proletariat. Lenin's life was described as a steady fight against the enemies of the working class. According to the official line, Lenin died as a martyr for the cause of the revolution. The party promised to continue the fight against its enemies. The article stressed that in fact Lenin did not die but was still alive in the souls of all the members of the Bolshevik party. The party and the entire communist family was imagined as a collective embodiment of Lenin. Finally the Central Committee promises that the party and its leaders will stick to Lenin's legacy and will fulfill his mission in the future.

Again one is struck by the religious metaphors and vocabulary in the official discourse about Lenin. The dead leader is described as the incarnation of the proletariat and the working class is imagined as a collective embodiment of Lenin. The dead leader is told to be alive in the souls of the members of the believing community and the collective is depicted in a constant fight against daemonic enemies. Apparently this was the language ordinary people understood. The news of Lenin's death was received in the whole country with great despair. The lying-in-state of Lenin in the house of the trade union in Moscow attracted several hundred thousand of people despite the fact that the outside temperature was around 40 degrees below zero and that one had to queue on the street for hours. In the whole country mourning meetings were organized and attracted millions of citizens.[35]

33 Tumarkin, Lenin Lives!, pp. 120-24.

34 Benno Ennker, Führerkult und mythisches Denken in der sowjetischen Öffentlichkeit 1924, in: Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 44 (1996), pp. 431-455, cf. pp. 441-2.

35 Tumarkin, Lenin Lives!, pp. 139-147.

Apparently the party leaders had not expected such a reaction among the population. The mass attendance to the mourning meetings in the whole country and to the lying-in-state in Moscow seemed to be true evidence that Lenin had the potential to function as a unifying symbol and as a bond to hold the country together. The unprecedented acceptance of the Lenin cult among the masses of the population was perceived by the regime as a unique chance to overcome its own political and social isolation.[36]

When the party decided to preserve not only Lenin's name in the collective memory but also to protect his body from decay and to expose it for public veneration in a Mausoleum in the centre of Moscow this was due to the insight in the usefulness of the cult for the stability of the regime.[37] One of the high officials of the Bolshevik party and former intimates of Lenin, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, put it bluntly: "Let him after death, as in life, serve the proletarian cause of the working class."[38] As a relic Lenin's task was to continuously legitimize Soviet power and mobilize the population. In fact there were a number of persons who expressed harsh critique over the plan not to bury Lenin's body - notably Lenin's wife Nadeshda Krupskaia – but their arguments were subordinated under the political objective to use Lenin as a unifying political symbol.[39]

The decision to preserve Lenin's body and to expose it to the public on the Red Square in Moscow was communicated to the masses as if the regime followed the wish of thousands of Soviet citizens. In fact just a few letters asking for the mummification of Lenin's body can be found in the party archives in Moscow. The new leaders apparently understood that loyalty and emotional attachment to the regime could best be secured by referring to traditional forms of adulation of outstanding individuals, notably to the veneration of Orthodox saints and the worship of the autocratic leader. That is why the various forms and expressions of the Lenin cult resemble so much the forms of pre-revolutionary worship of the political leader and Orthodox saints: Soviet children were "baptized" in the Name of Vladimir Il'ich (for ex. "Vladlen"), the day of his death, his *dies natalis* became a national holiday in the "Red calendar," his grave and his relics were made a site of attraction for international pilgrimage, his portrait was

36 Ennker, Anfänge, pp. 330-33.

37 On the preservation of Lenin's body and the erection of the mausoleum see N. N. Stoyanov, Arkhitektura Mavzoleya Lenina, Moskva 1950; Aleksej S. Abramov, Mavzolej Lenina, Moskva 6 1985; Il'ja B. Zbarskij and Samuel Hutchinson, Lenin und andere Leichen. Mein Leben im Schatten des Mausoleums, Stuttgart 1999; Aleksej S. Abramov, Pravda i vymysly o kremlevskom nekropole i Mavzolee, Moskva 2005; Giovanni Moretto, Lenin and His Body: A Case of Soviet Religiosity, in: Religion and Power in Europe. Conflict and Convergence, ed. By Joaquim Carnalho, Pisa 2007, pp. 279-296.

38 Tumarkin, Lenin Lives!, p. 179.

39 Ibid, p. 177.

omnipresent in so called "Lenin corners" in public institutions and private houses replacing the traditional collection of holy icons. Lenin was praised as the incarnation of the working class and the prophet of the new era. Cities, factories, schools and the like were named after him. Monuments for the new leader mushroomed all over the country. But does this mean that the cult of Lenin was based on and replaced the traditional forms of veneration of Orthodox saints or even the entire religious symbolic system in Russia?[40]

Revolution and Religion

Before turning to the differences which can also be described when comparing the Lenin cult with the veneration of Orthodox saints, one should reflect on possible explanations for the stated similarities. In this context one has to distinguish the motivation of the authors of the Lenin cult from the patterns of its reception.[41] The engineers of the Lenin cult used the vocabulary and the symbolic elements of traditional religious discourses not because they wanted to introduce a new religious system of belief or to refill the old structure with new content.[42] It seems more likely that they used old and broadly accepted patterns of communication either because they were themselves trained and socialized during the old regime – like the student of a seminar for Orthodox priests Josef

40 The proponents of the theory of „political religion," like Erich Voegelin, have argued that the symbolic systems of modern totalitarian regimes, like Communism, Fascism and National Socialism, are deeply rooted in pre-modern times and borrowed heavily from religious traditions. On the theory of political religion see for example Philippe Burrin, Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept, in: History and Memory 9 (1997), pp. 321-349. – The thesis of the importance of the Orthodox legacy for the emergence of Bolshevism in Russia was formulated and successfully widespread already long ago by Nikolai Berdiaev, The Origins of Russian Communism, London 1937.

41 Philippe Burrin distinguishes two major currents within the theory of „political religion." First a „phenomenological" approach, stressing similarities of symbolic practises of religion on the one and totalitarian systems on the other hand and second a functional approach arguing that the mass movements of the twentieth century fulfilled similar social and political functions like previously religions did. See Burrin, Political Religion.

42 The importance of the movement of Bolshevik „God-builders" („bogostroitel'i") for the emergence of the Lenin cult is a highly disputed issue among historians. Whereas Nina Tumarkin draws a line of continuity from the years 1907-11 when Bolsheviks like Krasin and Lunacharskii were part of the "God-builder-movement" and the first peak of the Lenin cult in 1924, Benno Ennker questions the importance of these traditions. See Nina Tumarkin, Religion, Bolshevism, and the Origins of the Lenin Cult, in: The Russian Review 40 (1981), pp. 35-46 and Ennker, Anfänge, pp. 534-555. On the dispute see Stites, Bolshevik Ritual Building in the 1920s, pp. 295-300; Hildermeier, Geschichte der Sowjetunion, p. 326.

Stalin – or that they used the vocabulary and symbolic practiced deliberately to communicate successfully with the masses of illiterate people in their country.[43]

The addressees of the cult on the other side, who apparently did not understand the abstract idea of Lenin's monumental propaganda, could handle the Lenin cult because it matched their traditional vision of the political and the religious world. It is important to emphasize in this context that the symbolic order of the new regime did not fully succeed to replace, neither the traditional system of religious and pagan beliefs nor the monarchical psychology of the people. Notwithstanding the efforts of the communists to extinguish all forms of religious practices, in fact the cultural systems of Bolshevism and Orthodoxy co-existed in Russia for a long time. In everyday life of ordinary Russian citizens the new holidays of the Red Calendar did not replace but enrich the traditional circle of the religious year. The group of newly established symbolic leaders and heroes did not substitute but supplement the traditional pantheon. The result was a new syncretism in symbolic practices and rituals of the common people which allowed the veneration of saint Sergei of Radonezh and Vladimir Il'ich Lenin at the same time.

Despite the fact that there are indeed a number of astonishing similarities between traditional Russian and new Bolshevik veneration of outstanding individuals, one should not ignore a number of major differences. First of all, the Lenin cult was and remained to be a part of the symbolic system of Bolshevism which was constructed as an anti-thesis and a counter-ideology to all forms of religious belief. The conservation of Lenin's body was not communicated as a result of any kind of religious miracle but as a proof for the supremacy and success of (secular) Soviet science.[44] Despite the fact that one of the pivotal slogans of the Lenin cult tried to make the Soviet citizens believe that "Lenin is more alive than all living beings," Bolshevism did not communicate any metaphysical truth. All promises which were made to the believers of the new ideology applied to the development of the terrestrial world.

Even if Lenin at first glance resembled a saint of the Orthodox Church, the veneration of his person and his relics served completely different purposes. "The use of religious vocabulary is not [necessarily] an attestation of the religiosity of those who speak."[45] True Bolsheviks did not call their children "Vladlen" because they expected divine protection from the founder of the Bolshevik party but because they wanted to express their loyalty with the new

43 Malte Rolf, Zwischen antikirchlichem Gegenfest und volksreligiöser Festtradition. Festkultur, Religion und Stalinismus in Sowjetrußland vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, in: Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 52,4 (2004), pp. 494-513, p. 513.

44 Ennker, Anfänge, p. 320.

45 Jörg Baberowski, Stalinismus und Religion, in: Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 52, 4 (2004), pp. 482-493, quotation p. 490.

political system. People were drawn to the mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow not for spiritual reasons but out of a combined sense of political duty and fascination, or even morbid curiosity. Portraits of the founder of the first socialist state in the world which were fixed in so-called "Lenin corners" were not the object of religious worship but a way to express allegiance with the new system. The Lenin cult was less an actual substitute for religion than a party effort to fuse religious and political rituals to mobilize the population and to legitimize the new regime.